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ABSTRACT

An approach to open admissions has been tested for the past five years at the City University of New York (CUNY). The open admissions policy was adopted in July 1969 by the Board of Higher Education, acting under intense political pressure after a spring of unrest and confrontation. After five years at CUNY, the ideal and practice of open admissions--defined as the acceptance of high school graduates into college regardless of their high school record and the provision of remedial measures to bring them to college performance level--still promotes intense debate. Its achievement is difficult to assess without agreement on the objectives open admissions is to serve. Access to lower income students and racial and ethnic minorities has been increased, yet considerable doubt remains as to whether students admitted are surviving. (Author/KE)

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OPEN ADMISSIONS AND THE CUNY EXPERIENCE

David A. Trivett

The advocates of open admissions believe it is a mechanism to promote social equality and upward mobility through educational opportunity. Critics view open admissions as an affront and attack on institutional and academic standards; its advocates reply that the quality of the educational process is determined by what happens to the student after he enrolls, not by what he lacks when he first matriculates.

In its ideal state, open admissions can be defined as "a system in which a high school graduate is not prevented by his past academic performance, his financial situation or other socio-economic factors from receiving the education he wants. Instead, the institution he attends gives him the support he needs to obtain a degree" (Shulman 1971, p. 1). From a practical standpoint, it is not easy to determine whether an open admissions program has achieved success unless prior agreement is reached on the purposes served by that program and their relation to the goals of higher education in general.

A type of open admissions already exists in many colleges and universities and has existed for some time. A number of state colleges and universities are required to admit every high school graduate in their state. In an unpublished 1971 survey, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges reported that 33 of 96 member institutions surveyed had a policy of admitting any graduate of an accredited high school within the state in their 1971-72 admissions. However, this form of open admissions has usually been "revolving door" open admissions, that is, admission with the expectation that a considerable portion of admitted students would be thinned out immediately (Hales and Tokar 1973). At the same time, open admissions has also served with mixed results as a mechanism to entice certain underrepresented groups of students (for example, veterans) back to college (Peter 1975). Another form of open admissions has been available to wealthy students who have always been able to

find college admission somewhere if they sought it (Karabel 1972). In fact, family income has traditionally been a more powerful predictor of college attendance than mental ability. None of these older forms of open admissions have the configuration suggested by Shulman's definition, which implies a supportive structure for masses of students seeking higher education.

THE CUNY EXPERIENCE

An approach to open admissions has been tested for the past five years at the City University of New York (CUNY). The open admissions policy was adopted in July 1969 by the Board of Higher Education, acting under intense political pressure after a spring of unrest and confrontation. For example, dissatisfaction was expressed with the degree to which the SEEK program (Search for Education, Elevation and Knowledge) was opening the college door for minority students (Healy 1969, pp. 54-46). The SEEK program had encouraged thousands of students to enroll by providing special counseling, stipends, and remedial courses (Libo and Stewart 1973, p. 54). Revising its Master Plan (which had called for a 1975 implementation of open admissions) the Board specified that beginning fall 1970 CUNY would guarantee admission to one of its schools for every high school graduate in New York City. One way to discover if a student can do college work is to let him try. The "revolutionary" nature of open admissions at CUNY came from the provision of remedial and supportive services so that the open door would not become a revolving door. The hope was that ethnic integration of the colleges would be accomplished and academic standards maintained. Students who were eligible under previous criteria would be guaranteed the place they desired. Also, the opportunity to transfer to other institutions and programs was preserved for students who succeeded under open admissions.

Since 1969, a significant number of students have chosen to pursue the path of open admissions at CUNY. From 1969 to 1974 undergraduate enrollment at four-year state universities in New York increased by 2.5 percent while the enrollment increase at CUNY was nearly double, at 60.2 percent. Similarly, enrollment at state two-year institutions increased 35.6 percent while at CUNY enrollment jumped an astronomical 102.7 percent (*Report of the Regents* . . . 1975, p. B-2.2).

These are noteworthy growths in enrollment. However, it is important to remember that varieties of change were occurring at CUNY long before open admissions. For example, admission standards changed radically at City College during this century. "Open admissions" was in effect at CUNY's beginning, with growing emphasis placed on higher standards thereafter. The required high school average in 1924 was 72, which was raised to 78 in 1936, 82 in 1962, and 85 in 1969 (Healy 1969, p. 55). In addition, such changes as a decrease in regimentation and prerequisites, and an increase in "relevant" courses, as well as changing class-

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room attendance requirements were motivated by pressures generated during the 1960's. Appropriate caution is required to avoid oversimplifying the rather complex chain of events that led to open admissions.

THE STUDENTS OF CUNY AND THEIR SUCCESS

Reasoning from one traditional indicator, the likelihood of success for many students admitted under open admissions is low. Approximately 12 percent of college freshmen at four-year institutions and 32 percent of community college freshmen admitted in fall 1970 were tested as reading below the 9th grade level in their last year in high school (*Report of the Regents . . . 1975*, p. B-3.3).

The success of the first year of open admissions at CUNY was examined by Rossman and associates (Rossman 1975). They surveyed freshmen in September 1970 and administered a follow-up survey one year later that included a sample of approximately 2,500 students. In addition to information gathered from interviews with faculty, administrators and over 1,000 freshmen, they also had access to institutional data.

Rossman and his associates found that after one year of open admissions freshman scores on reading and arithmetic achievement tests had improved significantly, the increase being about the same for open admissions and regular admissions students as for two- and four-year college students. Also, first year grades were higher than those of freshmen national norms. The investigators found the usual predictors of first-year academic outcomes—sex, high school grade, class rank, and test scores—were the best predictors of freshman grade-point averages. However, the level of degree aspiration expressed by the student also had important predictive value. Students who evidenced high motivation by reporting that they did extra reading, or studied in the library, for example, also tended to have higher grades. Students who took remedial courses or received tutoring earned lower grades than predicted for them. High school grades and level of degree aspiration were also good predictors of number of credits earned (pp. 162-163). Rossman and associates conclude that:

open-admissions or regular-admissions status per se was a relatively unimportant predictor of first-year outcomes. Although the two groups did indeed differ in many ways on the criteria examined, it is clear that open-admissions students brought with them to college a number of characteristics besides past achievements that proved to be important predictors of first year outcomes (p. 165).

A series of studies under the aegis of the Office of Program and Policy Research, CUNY, also provides data on the academic success of students at CUNY after open admissions. Kaufman and Botwinick (1975) describe the eight-semester attrition, retention, and graduation of fall 1970 freshmen. The following percentages refer to a base of the total fall 1970 group of 18,754 students entering CUNY senior colleges: 21.4 percent received a bachelor's degree; 78.6 percent did not receive a bachelor's degree, but 35.2 percent were still enrolled; 26.9 percent were enrolled all eight semesters; 8.3 percent were enrolled the eighth semester but not all eight; 43.3 percent were not enrolled during the eighth semester; and 25 percent had last enrolled during the first two years (p. 26). The likelihood that a student would graduate was closely related to his high school average at admission to CUNY. Thus, 31.4 percent of freshmen who entered with a high school average of 80 or above received a degree; 14.5 percent of those with 75 to 79; 7.6 of those with 70 to 74, and of those with high school averages below 70 at entry, 2.9 percent had graduated after four years.

More extensive data on academic outcomes for a two-year period of open admissions is provided by Lavin (1974b). Lavin concludes that high school average is positively related to success on every performance measure he studied. For example, a successful grade-point average was stipulated to be 2.00. On this measure, among entering senior college freshmen in 1970 and 1971, approximately 33 percent of the below 70 category students were successful; of those with a high school average of 70 to 74, approximately 44 percent were successful; of those with 75 to 79 averages, about 64 percent were successful; and among those students with high school averages of 80 or above (i.e., regular admission students for senior colleges) 87 percent succeeded in earning at least a 2.00 average. Performance measures requiring successful completion of specified course credit loads showed similar relationships (p. 3).

A high rate of attrition has been characteristic of many previous attempts at open admissions. To counter this tendency, compensatory programs are included in the CUNY experiment. One strategy is to provide remedial courses, with little or no credit given for this work, and another is to reduce the student's course load. Lavin (1974b, p. 9) concludes that in senior colleges, compensatory programs achieved mixed success during the first two years. For example, students with a moderate reduction in course load were as likely as those with full course loads to return the following semester; however, those with sharply reduced course loads, such as fewer than eight credits per semester, were less likely to be retained for the second semester.

Another frame of reference for graduation rates is a comparison of CUNY statistics with those at other institutions. Kaufman and Botwinick (1975) provide comparative data on graduation rates for students entering in fall 1970. The overall rate of graduation at CUNY senior colleges four years later was 21.4 percent. Students at university centers and colleges in the SUNY system graduated at a rate of approximately 51 percent (p. 54). Thus, from one perspective, the graduation rate of 21.4 for CUNY senior institutions appears low; from another perspective it looks high.

CHANGING RACIAL, ETHNIC, ECONOMIC CLIENTELE

One social purpose of open admissions is to improve the access to higher education of those whose racial, ethnic, or family economic status has tended to impede movement into higher education in the past. CUNY is an urban institution whose changing clientele reflects the changing city: "No other major university in the country enrolls as high a proportion of students from minority groups and students from poor homes, adults, prison inmates—and others long denied higher education—as does the City University" (*Report of the Regents . . . 1975*, p. 2). The past success of CUNY in extending access to minorities has been maintained, in that the student population at CUNY does represent proportionally the ethnic diversity of the City (p. 3). Furthermore, the existence of two- and four-year institutions does not mean that blocks of students are shunted to two-year colleges without hope of transfer. An automatic transfer policy is maintained for two-year college graduates. In perspective, the fall 1974 median family income of senior college students at CUNY was \$10,500, and of community college students, \$8,000. Almost 75 percent of the full-time undergraduates came from families with annual incomes of less than \$14,000.

To estimate the changes occurring in ethnic, racial and income characteristics of the students, first-time applications are analyzed by zip code areas and compared to Census Bureau demographic descriptions of the same regions. Kramer, Kaufman and Podell (1974) report the results of this type of analysis for freshmen from 1969 to 1972. During those years, the number of

applicants to CUNY from predominantly black zip code areas increased 204 percent, and from mostly black areas 157 percent. The number of applicants from Puerto Rican areas increased 125 percent. Applications from mostly white areas increased 76.2 percent, and from predominantly white areas the increase was 29.3 percent (p. 8).

Applying the same type of analysis to median family income, the reported changes using simplified income brackets were: below \$6000, applications up 170 percent; \$6-8000, applications up 115.2 percent; \$8-10,000, applications up 53 percent; \$10-12,000, applications up 39 percent; \$12-15,000, applications up 29 percent; and above \$15,000, applications up 17 percent. Thus, although open admissions led to increased applications across the spectrum, (an overall increase of 55 percent), applications from ethnic minority areas and from low family income areas increased most sharply (Kramer, Kaufman, and Podell 1974, p. 8).

Blacks comprised 14 percent of the freshman class in 1969, but by 1972 this percentage increased to 27 percent. Puerto Ricans represented 6 percent in 1969 but 14 percent in 1972. The proportion of non-Hispanic whites decreased from 80 percent of 20,000 in 1969 to 60 percent of 42,000 in 1974. Harrington (1975) concludes the main beneficiaries of open admissions have been children of ethnic backgrounds, often those from the Catholic working class (p. 17). Bard (1975) also reports that the biggest increase in students has come from non-Puerto Rican Roman Catholics. As a consequence of the increase in numbers of non-Jewish students, the proportion of Jewish students at CUNY has declined. According to Bard, at City College the proportion of Jewish students (which had been declining prior to 1969) was 57 percent in 1969, 33 percent in 1970, and 26 percent in 1971 (p. 394).

Whether access for minority groups and lower-income students will result in eventual college success for them has yet to be determined. However, Kaufman and Sotwinick (1975), using the same method of analyzing population by zip code area, determined that students from areas with a predominantly white population were most likely to have graduated by the end of eight semesters (26.5 percent of senior college enrollees from predominantly white zip code areas), whereas students from predominantly black zip code areas were least likely to have graduated (8.2 percent of 1970 applicants). Students from Puerto Rican areas graduated from senior college at the rate of 11.4 percent. The same patterns were true for a measure called graduation and retention rate, an indicator of students who either have graduated or whose attendance pattern over eight semesters indicates their continued intention to complete degree requirements. Graduation and retention rates and graduation rates also rose in a pattern that reflects an increase in median family income. Thus, whereas 8.8 percent of those students from zip code areas with median family incomes below \$6,000 graduated in eight semesters, the highest percentage graduation rate (28 percent) was attained by students coming from areas with a median family income of \$12-15,000 per year (pp. 13, 39, 40).

After reviewing the data on changing freshmen application and success as reflected in graduation, retention, and credit generation, one is forced to conclude that although open admissions has been a success in providing access to a sizeable group of previously underrepresented students, large numbers of these newcomers are not succeeding once admitted.

REACTIONS TO OPEN ADMISSIONS AT CUNY

The faculty response to the challenges of open admissions at CUNY has been the subject of numerous appraisals (see Bossone and Weiner 1975; Kaplan 1972; Lederman 1973; Libo and Stewart 1973; Quinn 1973; Wasser 1973). Open admissions has often been on the receiving end of criticism that should be directed elsewhere and has often become the scapegoat in the battle over academic standards. For example, Wasser (1973) concludes "that the City University of New York's open admissions policy, evidence of the coming of universal higher education, was instituted by professional administrators, considering themselves management, without significant participation by faculty, whom they thought labor, on orders of society interpreted by its chosen political leaders in response to a discerned social evil, the miseducation of sizable minority groups" (Wasser 1973, p. 159).

Another cautionary note about the administration of open admissions comes from the Professional Staff Congress (PSC) of CUNY. The PSC asserts that its membership is fully committed to open admissions, but only with the provision that appropriate measures be taken to insure the success of the students admitted. The PSC charges that the open admissions mandate has not been achieved by the administration of CUNY, as demonstrated by inadequate funding and planning of remediation and counseling, and by inadequate limits set on class size (p. 2). In addition, the PSC has charged the CUNY administration with failure to provide adequate academic support measures, such as training and teaching materials for the faculty, as well as condoning inadequate assessment of the outcomes of open admissions. The PSC asserts

the University administration has consistently withheld information from the Board, the media, the public and the instructional staff. And the statistical data it has released are designed to convey the impression that Open Admissions—without adequate remediation, without limits on class size, without academic support, and without a qualitative critical assessment of the outcomes thus far—has been successful (PSC 1974, pp. 3-4).

The recent fiscal crisis of New York City has resulted in a budget crisis for CUNY and more debate on open admissions. The 1974-75 operating expenses of CUNY totalled \$585 million. The Board of Higher Education requested a budget of \$702 million for 1975-76. This amount was reduced by the mayor to \$654 million in December 1974, then reduced again in July 1975 to \$597 million, and further reduced by the Board to \$587 million (*Report of the Regents* . . . 1975, pp. 8-9). At the beginning of the 1975-76 academic year, the City notified CUNY officials that the budget would be cut by an additional \$55 million; this cut would have to be absorbed by spring 1976, beginning February 1.

In the face of these budgetary demands, the Board of Higher Education voted December 15, 1975 to cut \$54.6 million from the spring CUNY budget, primarily by placing faculty and staff members on a forced, month-long, unpaid "furlough" in the spring. In addition, the Board agreed to impose in fall 1976 a set of minimum academic standards on incoming freshmen so that admission of students whose reading and mathematics abilities are below the eighth grade level would be restricted (Peterson 1975c, p. 1). The consequence of this restriction on open admissions besides saving money, would be to cut minority enrollment by more than two-thirds which would return CUNY to the racial composition that existed prior to open admissions. These figures (at-

tributed to a special study by David Lavin and Richard A. Silberstein in Peterson 1975a, p. 1) are based on a sample study of the 1971 entering class that determined that 72 percent of the black students sampled scored below the eighth grade level in either reading or mathematics, as did 65 percent of the Hispanic students and 20 percent of the white students.

CONCLUSION

After five years at CUNY, the ideal and practice of open admissions—defined as the acceptance of high school graduates into college regardless of their high school record and the provision of remedial measures to bring them to college performance level—still promotes intense debate. Its achievement is difficult to assess without agreement on the objectives open admissions is to serve. Access to lower income students and racial and ethnic minorities has been increased, yet considerable doubt remains as to whether students admitted are surviving.

Debate over exterior issues also clouds evaluation. At present this debate focuses on CUNY's fiscal problems. If the budget crunch is resolved as now planned, one apparent achievement of open admissions—the enrollment of numerous underrepresented groups—will be in jeopardy.

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